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ABSTRACT

A study was made of approximately 100 college students' attitudes toward two-paycheck families, using a questionnaire. The study found no support for "working mother" guilt and anxiety; for example, there was no overall family conflict effect evident. When compared with students from families with nonemployed mothers, students from two-paycheck families did not report greater family discord. They also showed no greater tendency to blame their mothers for childhood or current problems (social, esteem, intellectual, or academic). Students reported admiring mothers who worked full time most, mothers who worked part time next, and nonemployed mothers least. The majority of students with full-time employed mothers did not perceive maternal work status as having compromised either mothers' happiness or marriage quality. A tendency of students to favor the part-time work alternative over either full-time work or nonemployment for mothers emerged when a composite measure of childhood experience was calculated, including items tapping the subjects' admiration of their mothers and their view of their mothers' ability to meet their children's need for support and independence and to foster intellectual and academic success. The college students almost all expected to become parents; most males expected their wives to be unemployed until their youngest child reached age 6, whereas most females expected to be working part time during that period. It is recommended that colleges spend time helping students sort out work and family values before they become employed and parents. (KC)

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Student Views of the Two-Paycheck Family Lifestyle: Boon, Burden, or Both

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Introduction

Recent Census Bureau statistics indicate that the two-paycheck family is now the norm, even among families with young children (including those under one year of age). It's reasonable to predict that most of today's college students will eventually find themselves in two-paycheck family situations. The two-paycheck lifestyle is gratifying and wonderful in many respects, but as many of you know, it can entail lots of juggling, and put even solid relationships to quite a test. Some of my previous research has shown that the two-paycheck lifestyle works best for people who have been clear about their personal and career goals for a long time, especially those who have been able to plan careers that would accommodate the need for the flexibility associated with optimal two-paycheck family functioning. These findings suggest that as counselors we need to help the students we advise engage not only in career planning, but in "whole life" planning. We need to help them visualize their future lives as clearly as possible, in order to help them anticipate and address problems early on. The interdependence of professional and personal success has become more pronounced, now that individual workers can no longer expect to delegate household and child care responsibilities to an unemployed spouse. Tomorrow's outstanding performer in the work place will

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most often need to have found a strategy for successfully balancing the sometimes conflicting roles of worker, parent, and spouse. We can help students make optimal, informed choices about their lives, by helping them see the "big picture" of their future lives. As they become more aware of the ways in which they might want their professional and personal lives to unfold, they may experience shifts in values and priorities that may influence their career paths. For example, they may decide that simple salary considerations shouldn't carry the entire weight in their career planning. (A 1991 survey of student attitudes on our campus showed that salary was unanimously the first priority in career planning among students sampled.) Awareness about the two-paycheck family reality can promote more egalitarian planning among couples, who may learn to value the importance of both future spouses' career development more fairly. Lastly, early consideration of the two-paycheck lifestyle and the issues it presents may help to prevent undue guilt and anxiety later on. Students who are informed about research findings on two-paycheck families (regarding effects on both parents and children) might begin to view this lifestyle alternative more positively and less as an unfortunate economic necessity.

Students' Perceptions of Their Own Employed and Nonemployed Mothers

This past semester, my ongoing research on two-paycheck families focused on students' views of their own mothers. I was interested in assessing whether maternal employment affected college students' perceptions of their childhoods, the care they had received, and their relationships with both of their parents. Part of my motivation to examine these issues grew out of an assumption that students' expectations and preferences for their own adult lives would be shaped by their family histories. This work also represents a

needed extension of many decades of work examining the short-term impact of maternal employment on children. To date, there has been no systematic examination of the long-term, adult consequences of maternal employment (although for some time there has been unsubstantiated conjecture about myriad adverse sequelae). Last, I was drive by a purely personal agenda: my goal was also to evaluate the probability of a future backlash from my own four children!

Student Perceptions of Their Own Employed and Nonemployed Mothers

Although the size of the current sample was limited (approximately 100), the results yielded a picture of students' attitudes which is probably reliable. For the most part, the findings provided no support for "working mother" guilt and anxiety. For example, we found no overall family conflict effect. When compared with students from families with nonemployed mothers, students from two-paycheck families did not report greater family discord. They also showed no greater tendency to blame their mothers for childhood or current problems (social, esteem, intellectual, or academic). Students reported admiring mothers who worked fulltime most, mothers who worked parttime next, and nonemployed mothers least.

The only consistently perceived "casualties" of maternal employment were perceptions of the mothers' happiness and quality of her marriage. Many students whose mothers were employed fulltime during the subjects' infancy or preschool years reported the belief that their mothers "would have been happier" and their marriages "would have been better" had their mothers' work status been different. However, it is important to note that even here, the majority of students with fulltime employed mothers did not perceive maternal work status as having compromised either mothers' happiness or marriage

quality. A tendency of students to favor the parttime work alternative over either fulltime work or nonemployment for mothers, emerged when a composite measure of childhood experience was calculated, including items tapping the subjects' admiration of their mothers, and their view of their mother's ability to meet her child's need for support, independence, and to foster intellectual and academic success. High scores on the composite indicate a greater tendency to attribute negative childhood experiences to maternal work status. There was a significant difference ($p.<.02$) on this composite measure between subjects whose mothers worked parttime ($x = 5.71$, s.d. = 0.76) and those whose mothers worked either fulltime ($x = 8.83$, s.d. = 2.79) or those whose mothers were unemployed ($x = 8.75$, s.d. = 2.19). A two-way ANOVA on the composite measure for sex and maternal work status confirmed the main effect for maternal work status and showed no main effect for sex nor an interaction effect. These findings indicate that college students whose mothers worked parttime reported the most favorable outcomes. This could account for why in making their own career and family plans, so many college students report preferring arrangements which would enable the mothers to work parttime. It is also consistent with a variety of other sources emphasizing the advantages of parttime maternal employment and depicting parttime work place involvement as optimal for both women and their families.

Students Own Lifestyle Expectations

We were not too surprised to find that virtually all of the college students we sampled stated that they expected to become parents. It was interesting to note however, that a significant sex difference emerged when students were asked to indicate how many children they expected to have; while the men sampled planned to have a mean of 2.89 children, the women expected to

have smaller families (mean = 2.18 children, $p. < .05$). This may reflect greater awareness of the need to balance personal and career aspirations on the part of the women. The females sampled may have heard that typically mothers shoulder a disproportionate share of responsibility for child care and housework in two-paycheck families, and may accordingly envision a smaller family as more desirable and manageable for themselves.

The "good news" we found when comparing the expectations of male and female students, is that across various items there was a fair amount of agreement between the sexes. Once children are six years old, the majority anticipates being part of a two-paycheck family. Slightly more females than males expect the mother will work, and more females expect the mother will work fulltime. Both males and females expect to contribute equally to family income, and both anticipate a 40% - 60% household work split "favoring" the female spouse.

Responses to items concerning expectations about family life with younger children (preschoolers and infants) reveal a gender gap which could foreshadow potential problems. Almost all of the males sampled expect their wives will be unemployed until their youngest child is six. In contrast, the majority of females expect to work parttime during these early years of parenting. In addition to an obvious need for further communication within couples about these disparate visions of future family life, the results also raise questions about the work places' ability to provide the number of parttime jobs sought by these young women. The viability of their solution to the career-home balancing problem may be limited by an inflexible job market that provides few parttime work options.

Ways to Help Students Prepare

One strategy for readying today's students for their two-paycheck family futures involves revising standard career planning workshops to incorporate more discussion of the tensions between career and family goals. Providing exercises designed to clarify individual's and couple's values and priorities can also be helpful. Making career decisions while planning for shifting priorities throughout the life span can help students organize their thinking about the need for balance and make them aware that there need be no one, single answer to questions pertaining to career choice-making.

In our experience at Ursinus, specialized workshops addressing the topic of two-paycheck families have drawn a good student audience (although there are consistently more females than males among those attending). Discussions of personal attitudes and expectations, combined with comparisons of these with research-based projections about the two-paycheck reality, can help get students thinking. Students can be asked, "How would you feel if you continued along your current career path and you ended up a parent with young children and both you and your spouse worked? How well would your present career path accommodate your needs?" Although we can't predict how the work world will change in the future (and hopefully it will become better suited to the two-paycheck family) it's probably best not to be overly optimistic. Given the pressures of global competition, work place changes probably won't ease the strains very much in the coming decade. As a result, a careful look at the demandingness and inflexibility of certain career paths can be valuable.

In our specialized workshops, we've considered the three strategies for the two-paycheck family lifestyle. First, the <u>(Try to) Have It All</u> approach,

where both spouses have "big," demanding careers, has also been dubbed the "stress track." We discuss how success here depends upon finding a very high energy, supportive, and cooperative mate, who shares your strong desire to make the personal sacrifice often necessitated by this option. Second, we consider the Balance It All approach, where both partners opt for parttime work while children are young and decide to postpone material success in favor of permitting both spouses the opportunity to share in both work place and family satisfactions. This "Family Track" requires some trail-blazing, especially on the part of men. We discuss how a certain amount of self-actualization may be necessary to successfully wean oneself from standard work place benchmarks of success and achievement. Third, we look at the Modern Traditionalist approach, where one spouse works parttime while the other works fulltime. This "Mommy or Daddy Track" offers a viable temporary solution for many, but we encourage students to consider the possible long-term price for both spouses associated with this option. To work optimally, both partners must view their respective "sacrifices" (career momentum on the one hand, and bonds with children on the other) equitably. It has to feel like a fair set of compromises all around, if future resentment is to be avoided.

Working with relevant academic departments (e.g. psychology, sociology, economics/business management) can also be a way of increasing student awareness. Guest lectures or discussions often fit into existing courses. Involving students in research concerning attitudes toward family and work demands, and balancing the two is another valuable educational tool.

Last, but certainly not least, self disclosure is one of the most powerful ways of opening up students' eyes. Exposure to campus role models, who share their own experiences with two-paycheck families, is probably more influential

than any workshop series could ever be. Seeing fathers carrying babies with them to work on occasion, and hearing parents make frantic but workable last minute arrangements when a child's illness forces rescheduling, reshape student attitudes instantaneously. Conscious use of this means of communication may be our most instructive and compelling means of preparing students for their future in a two-paycheck family world.